



Vincent O'Malley helps New Zealand confront its bloody history

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Lyndall Ryan

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BOOK REVIEW

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Lyndall Ryan

University of Newcastle, Australia

The New Zealand Wars **NGA PAKANGA O AOTEAROA**, by Vincent O'Malley, Wellington, Bridget Williams Books, 2019, 272 pp., ISBN 9781988545998 (Paperback), \$NZ 39.99, ISBN 9781988587011 (EPub), \$NZ 20.00, ISBN 9781988587028 (Kindle), ISBN 9781988587035 (PDF), Publishers website: <https://www.bwb.co.nz/books/new-zealand-wars>

After the long period of disavowal of the frontier wars in Australia, it is important to be reminded that New Zealand is also emerging from a long period of amnesia about its colonial wars. Until the 1980s, most histories focused on only one of the 10 war zones, thus overlooking their impact more broadly. Yet as Vincent O'Malley points out in the blurb to this important new book, the New Zealand Wars 'profoundly shaped the course and direction of our nation's history'. They comprised a series of conflicts over a period of 40 years and the loss of nearly 6000 lives, mostly Māori, and ending with Māori losing 3,676,000 acres of land.

The wars were fought over Māori and Pākehā (white settler) interpretations of modern New Zealand's founding document, the Treaty of Waitangi. The Māori chiefs who signed the document in 1840 believed that it offered each iwi or tribe sovereignty and possession of their land, some of which they were prepared to sell to incoming settlers. The British government, however, believed that it bestowed them sovereignty over Māori people and their lands. The wars began in 1844, when Māori iwi in the North and South Islands realised that the settlers (Pākehā) held a very different interpretation of Māori landownership and sovereignty as set out in the treaty. The wars intensified in the 1860s, first in Taranaki and then in the Waikato, where the New Zealand government summarily seized Māori land to build a railway and then sold the remaining land to settlers without compensation to the original owners. The wars eventually subsided in 1872 when the Māori chief, Te Kooti, whose lands lay inland from present-day Gisborne, agreed to lay down his weapons.

O'Malley is the author of several books on the New Zealand Wars, and most particularly *The Great War in New Zealand*, published in 2016, in which he argues that the defining conflict in New Zealand history did not take place on the Western Front, or at Gallipoli, or in North Africa, but rather at Waikato in 1863–64. O'Malley's brief from the publisher of this book is to produce an accessible short history of the wars for the general reader. He succeeds in the task by further developing the argument of his 2016 book by demonstrating how each phase of the war shaped New Zealand's history.

O'Malley shows how, in the aftermath of the wars' first phase, also known as the Northern War of 1844–45, the centre of New Zealand commerce, which had long been

based at Kororāreka, which was a key site of conflict in the Bay of Islands, relocated to the fledgling settlement at Auckland, which quickly became the country's largest city. The town of Kororāreka was renamed Russell, and although vestiges of the war remained, New Zealanders soon forgot that anything had happened there.

The next stage of the war emerged after the settler (Pākehā) achievement of self-government in 1856. O'Malley shows how the New Zealand government, also known as 'the Crown', became single minded in their determination to interpret the Waitangi treaty as the denial of Māori sovereignty and had no hesitation in declaring Māori who resisted the unauthorised Pākehā occupation of Māori lands as 'insurgents'. They proclaimed martial law against Māori on at least four occasions after 1860 and imprisoned alleged insurgents without trial on the Chatham Islands.

The Taranaki and Waikato Wars of 1860–70 were the critical moments in the wars. They destroyed many Māori communities, such as the once prosperous Tūranga Māori, who lost a significant number of adult males in combat with the Crown and whose lands were confiscated without compensation. According to O'Malley, the surviving community plunged into poverty and ill-health, which in turn fuelled the Pākehā belief that became widespread in the latter stages of the war that Māori were a racially inferior people and thus destined to die out. Yet other Māori chiefs such as Te Kooti fought back, and in the final phase the war ended in a stalemate. With no peace treaty in place, it is not surprising that many Māori today consider that the wars have not yet concluded.

Even so, according to O'Malley 'the wars tipped the scales. In the battle between two competing ideas of what the Treaty of Waitangi stood for, it was the Crown's version that won. This envisaged a treaty of cession and unbridled sovereignty, not mutual partnership and dialogue' (240–241). Pākehā were no longer required to treat Māori as equals. It would be another century before the movement for redress was heard.

For the reader who knows little about the New Zealand Wars, this book presents a clear and compelling account of the terrible and destructive war that lasted for three decades. I can think of no other historian who could write about these dreadful events with the same integrity and compassion. The book, short though it is, enhances O'Malley's reputation as the leading historian of the New Zealand Wars. He demonstrates complete mastery of the complex issues that have defeated others before him, and understands the importance of the wars to New Zealand today.